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“WHITE IS NOT MY COLOUR”: PENNY DREADFUL, THE POSTCOLONIAL, AND THE CHANGING GOTHIC HEROINE

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“I never learned the rules,” Vanessa Ives.²

References to Egyptology, the search for the source of the Nile, and a half-Indian/half English Dr Jekyll/Mr Hyde all hint at the postcolonial situations present in the original version of the Showtime/Sky Atlantic television series *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016). Each episode illustrates the horror and systemic problems with colonialism through the characters and their personal relationships with colonial history set in a literary Gothic world. *Penny Dreadful*, as a Gothic television series scaffolded by famous monsters, examines Great Britain’s relationship with Empire. For many of the male characters in *Penny Dreadful*, this relationship comes in the form of guilt over past misdeeds. However, Vanessa Ives, the main female protagonist, faces present danger and disruption from America and the European continent as she singlehandedly challenges the concept of a Gothic heroine. *Penny Dreadful* as Elleke Boehmer explains postcolonial literature, “subversively scrutinizes the colonial relationship,” and Vanessa’s possessed nature and eventual union with Dracula indeed subvert the structures present (3). The postcolonial nature of the series, and the strength of Vanessa’s character arguably build on traditional Gothic structures, but instead of a fainting damsel waiting for rescue (in the vein of many seminal Gothic female characters), or a bold heroine (often labelled as the Female Gothic Heroine) investigating the third floor of a stately home, audiences meet a self-aware, self-sufficient female protagonist from the beginning.

Unlike the superheroes and demigods of contemporary media, and different, too, from the heroine of *Jane Eyre* (1847) – that iconic Female Gothic Bildungsroman – and *Dracula’s* (1897) stoic Mina Harker, Vanessa says “I am” and that is enough. She is a power in her own right, but in spite of this agency, the constraints of the Gothic structure nonetheless secure her fate, just as the British Empire eventually confronts its own past in the series. Vanessa, through her independent choices, subverts the Gothic Heroine at the same time as the Gothic in *Penny Dreadful* continues to destabilise colonial attitudes. This article will illustrate both how the conventions of Gothic fiction require the sacrifice of female characters, and how *Penny Dreadful*, though it presents as a postcolonial series, can still be discussed as a conservative text. This latter point becomes clear through interrogating Vanessa’s full character arc.

Female Characters, Self-Sacrifice, and the Politics of Gothic Colonialism

Penny Dreadful communicates Gothic horrors and colonial nightmares through a literary setting. The first instalment of the series offers a complete cast of seminal Gothic names: Victor Frankenstein, Dr Jekyll, Mr Hyde, Dorian Gray, Abraham Van Helsing, Dr Seward, Dracula, and Renfield. The plot is filled with the supernatural, a dark, macabre setting, and a fear of vampire invasion. With these traditional Gothic tropes, a viewer might expect a fainting, histrionic Female Gothic victim/heroine to round out the cast, but as Vanessa tells Frankenstein, “white is not my colour,” and *Penny Dreadful*'s original female protagonist does not come from a specific Gothic tradition, nor is she a Gothic Heroine (S2E4). Stephanie Green writes that although the female characters in *Penny Dreadful* are “[m]ore interesting than their mere potential to nurture and harm, theirs is nevertheless a compromised power, inflicted with darkness, uncertainty and threat” (n.p.). In addition to Vanessa, there are other fascinating and powerful female characters including Lucy Frankenstein/Brona Croft in *Penny Dreadful*, and Green calls these the Gothic New Women who are “doomed to fail” (n.p.). As a colonised female character, however, Vanessa stands apart. Despite her strength, resolve, and tenacity, she succumbs – as I have begun to suggest above – to the constraints of the genre, even though she does not easily fit any of the prescriptions for female characters that emerge across the history of Gothic literature.

An established strand of Gothic literary criticism has argued that the Gothic tradition, from the time of Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis, provides two tracks: The Female Gothic and the Male Gothic. Both forms of the genre are distinguishable for their dark, dangerous settings, villains, heroes, heroines/damsels, use of the supernatural, and invocations of fears regarding bodily invasion. However, Lewis is usually associated with horror, and Radcliffe more often linked to terror. This difference sets the genres apart from each other. Ellen Moers influentially writes that the Female Gothic is the work done in the genre by women writers, but the contrasts between Male and Female traditions also cut deeper, as Yael Shapira explains:

Yet it was perhaps in the treatment of the body, and specifically of the female body, that the two authors [Lewis and Radcliffe] reached their most profound dispute [...] The imaginative dialectic between a pristine body and a disordered one is present in Radcliffe's fiction, especially through the persistent (if unspoken) fear of rape [...] Uncanny sightings became real ghosts; the prospect of violence was realized in detail as rape and murder. [...] Put simply, [Lewis's] *The Monk* overflows with bodies. Live or dead, chaste or sexual, all are depicted with the same brash disregard for delicacy, and all — with perhaps a single exception — are female. (463; 466)

In the case of *Penny Dreadful*, violence against the female characters abounds. The supernatural elements are real, and the female protagonist eventually dies.

Viewers in the twenty-first century expect to see a female character presented with modern sensibilities, and though Eva Green's Vanessa provides the audience with a strong woman, her ending is one of submission and sacrifice. Although much has been written about the traditional Gothic heroine/damsel in seminal Gothic novels, there remains a need to discuss the changing role of female characters in contemporary Gothic televisual texts, as the nature of these characters represent a changing reality for modern audiences. But what may not be clearly understood is key: The conservative nature of the Gothic requires the sacrifice of the female characters regardless of the political nature of the narrative.

To further this discussion, defining both the terms postcolonial and imperial is paramount. For the sake of my argument, *Penny Dreadful*, as being discussed here, is a form of a postcolonial text. In *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (1995), Boehmer defines postcolonial literature thusly: "It is writing that sets out in one way or another to resist colonialist perspectives [...] To give expression to colonized experience, postcolonial writers sought to undercut thematically and formally the discourses which supported colonization — the myths of power, the race classifications, the imagery of subordination" (3). Colonialism as the act of inhabiting an occupied land, imperialism as the political nature of the colonised, and the postcolonial as the subversion of the relationships between the indigenous inhabitants and the colonisers all are intrinsically intertwined in ideas and actions throughout the series.

Penny Dreadful not only is postcolonial, but is also anti-imperial as the series highlights the problems with imperialism as well as through the discussion of protecting the larger empire through the women who inhabit it. Boehmer states that "imperialism can be taken to refer to the authority assumed by a state over another territory — authority expressed in pageantry and symbolism, as well as in military and economic power. It is a term associated in particular with the expansion of the European nation-state in the nineteenth century" (2). The women in the series, especially Vanessa, are subjects of the British Empire and risk colonisation by a foreign invader, Dracula. *Penny Dreadful*, although a modern media product, is set in the nineteenth century. What is of most importance to this discussion, however, is the Gothic, and the Imperial Gothic is also present in *Penny Dreadful*. Patrick Brantlinger in *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914* (1988) writes: "The three principal themes of imperial Gothic are individual regression or going native; an invasion of civilization by the forces of barbarism or demonism; and the diminution of opportunities for adventure and heroism in the modern world" (location 4514). Vanessa threatens not only the Empire but the world through her "regression" by accepting her past life as an Egyptian goddess, her colonised body after her union with Dracula, and her inner strength that eschews the need for a hero as she sacrifices herself.

On the surface, *Penny Dreadful* seems to articulate a postcolonial, anti-imperialist sensibility, but the constraints of the Gothic genre keep the series ultimately conservative in nature when it comes to the character of Vanessa. Since the late-twentieth century, Gothic scholars have frequently drawn on postcolonial analysis because of the complex socio-political changes registered in seminal Gothic novels. William Hughes and Andrew Smith note in "Defining the Relationships between Gothic and the Postcolonial" (2003):

The Gothic has historically maintained an intimacy with colonial issues [...] [T]he Gothic, is and always has been, *post-colonial*, and this is where, in the Gothic text, disruption accelerates into change, where the colonial encounter [...] proves a catalyst to corrupt, to confuse or to redefine the boundaries of power, knowledge and ownership" (1, original emphasis).

Hughes in "A Singular Invasion: Revisiting the Postcolony of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*" (2003) also argues that the genre of Gothic fiction has a postcolonial quality. "Gothic *has* to be the face of the postcolonial because the culture of Gothic — grandiose, oppressive, deviant and yet awesome in the power of its presence — is somehow not merely the face of the past, but of the imperialist past also" (89, original emphasis). To be sure, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* discusses racial purity through a literary rhetoric grounded in colonialism and pseudo-biology. Stephen Arata explains that during the late-Victorian period, Great Britain "as a race of people, as a political and imperial force, as a social and cultural power — was in irretrievable decline" (622). In *Penny Dreadful*, the character of Vanessa embraces the danger of this changing world.

In addition to the postcolonial, the imperial nature of the Gothic is also an approach to Gothic studies and a powerful thread in this series. Carol Margaret Davison writes that "the Imperial Gothic of the *fin de siècle* [...] features the re-animated traumas of a nation's colonial past" (137). Great Britain, in many narratives of this type, must consider the possibility of losing global prominence, and, as different regions of the world become connected through colonial relations, must also confront fears of invasion. In *Penny Dreadful*, the fears of invasion come from both the European vampire – Dracula – and from Ethan Chandler, the American werewolf. Brantlinger suggests, "Imperial Gothic expresses anxieties about the waning of religious orthodoxy, but even more clearly it expresses anxieties about the ease with which civilization can revert to barbarism or savagery and thus about the weakening of Britain's imperial hegemony" (location 4496). In *Penny Dreadful*, danger comes from far away from home.

Penny Dreadful not only expounds on the fear of the Other coming to London to do ill, but also engages with the shame of colonisation through the overarching invasion narrative present in the series. Ultimately, *Penny Dreadful* confronts the taboo idea that women's bodies, like inhabited land, can also be colonised by invaders, a sense that is drawn from Stoker's invocation of reverse colonisation in *Dracula*, the main text on which *Penny Dreadful* is based. In *Colonial Desire* (1995), Robert Young explains, "Colonialism was a machine: a machine of war, of bureaucracy and administration, and above all, of power [...] In that sense it was itself the instrument that produced its own darkest fantasy — the unlimited and ungovernable fertility of 'unnatural' unions" (98-99). *Penny Dreadful* specifically pushes the boundaries of Hughes and Smith's notion of "power, knowledge and ownership" through the character of Vanessa, her journey in a colonial-era London, and her (unsuccessful) fight to resist Dracula's influence and invasion. *Penny Dreadful* then reveals the struggle of both the colonisers and the colonised through the characters of Dracula and Vanessa. To quote Glennis Byron in "Global Gothic" (2012): "Gothic in these colonial contexts frequently

functions to contest the more optimistic foundational narratives of new worlds” (qtd. in Punter 532). The mixing of blood, foreign and domestic, is a constant cause of unease in *Dracula*, and as is often the case in Gothic narratives, diseased blood comes from afar.

In *Penny Dreadful*, the invading presence comes through Dracula and his vampire hordes, but Vanessa, much like Mina Harker, is chosen because of her personal brush with darkness. Vanessa’s relationship with Dracula plunges the world into peril, not just because Dracula gains his ultimate bride but because his bride is colonised. A similar conundrum plays out in Stoker’s novel. Mina, after being contaminated by Dracula, says to her husband Jonathan Harker that he should kill her if she is unable to be saved from vampirism. Mina says, “But you must remember that I am not as you are. There is a poison in my blood, in my soul, which may destroy me; which must destroy me, unless some relief comes to us” (286). Mina, in the novel, is saved through the strength of her male caregivers, but in *Penny Dreadful*, the men are not up to the task, and Vanessa must die because she threatens them.

From the start of the series, Vanessa is a marked outsider, much like Dracula himself, through her possession. This possession appears as a tattoo coming to the surface of her skin, and through the knowledge of her destiny to merge with Amun-Ra, now presenting as Dracula. Brantlinger explains further, “[Imperial Gothic] also led to the far reaches of the Empire, where strange gods and ‘unspeakable rites’ still had their millions of devotees” (location 4450). “Strange gods” and “unspeakable rites” are visually presented through Vanessa who is physically marked by an ancient society once looted for relics which are stored in the British Museum. In the episode, “Verbis Diablo,” Egyptologist Ferdinand Lyle says, “most of the plundered riches [...] are scrupulously ignored” (S2E2). In addition to Vanessa’s personal connection to Egypt through this possession, Vanessa’s guardian, Sir Malcolm embarks on a quest to find the source of the Nile. His adventuring destroys his family and illustrates some cultural tensions around England’s Egyptian politics and their domestic impact. The Egyptian motif is not unique in Gothic and popular fiction during the Victorian era, with writers – including Stoker and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle – exploring what Bulfin terms the “Egyptian Question” after the creation of the Suez Canal (411-412). Bulfin further explains that “contemporaneously with developments in Anglo-Egyptian politics, a subgenre of Egyptian-themed gothic fiction began to grow in popularity, within which concerns over the Egyptian situation tended to find fictional expression in the form of the supernatural invader” (412). Brantlinger adds, “Although their attitudes and emphases often differed from those of later generations, many early Victorians took a keen interest in emigration, the ‘opening up’ of Africa, the Eastern Question, and even the China trade” (location 110). The Egyptian elements present in *Penny Dreadful* are more closely aligned with *The Jewel of Seven Stars* (1903) than with *Dracula*, but both of Stoker’s narratives contain, according to Punter and Byron, a “powerful, often demonic woman” (167). Vanessa is this character. She, according to Joan Clayton in the episode “The Nightcomers,” was born with her supernatural abilities and is more powerful than she knows (S2E3).

Even though *Penny Dreadful* discusses colonial history in a twenty-first-century language of inclusion and diversity, some characters, including Vanessa, remain hindered by the conservative

worldview presented in many Gothic narratives. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," (1985) discusses how British literature was used to justify colonialism through characters like Henry Clerval in *Frankenstein* (1818) and Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* (1847). This colonial impulse is on display in Mary Shelley's novel when Frankenstein's friend Clerval has "the design of making himself complete master of the Oriental languages" (70). Ultimately, Clerval desires to travel to India and impose English ideas on the indigenous population.

When a coloniser returns to England, their life is forever changed as Charlotte Brontë illustrates through the characters of Bertha Mason – a Creole from Jamaica – and her husband Edward Rochester. Bertha deserves her incarceration and punishment, according to Rochester (and presumably many of Brontë's readers), because of her nature, heritage, and insanity. Bertha, taken back to her husband's native England is unceremoniously locked in the third-floor room in Thornfield Hall due to her mental state. Rochester is punished for his sins through physical maiming, but he and Jane eventually live happily ever after. These characters educate the reader about the dangerous Other (person or a country) in need of civilized men from England to help them. Excluding Clerval who is stopped and killed by Frankenstein's Creature, colonisers like Rochester (and by extension *Penny Dreadful's* Sir Malcom) somewhat acknowledge their roles in colonisation, but eventually strive to separate themselves from their past misdeeds to maintain their class, cultural, and racial superiority.

Vanessa is surrounded by a group of unsavoury male characters who suffer from their own excesses and embody Great Britain's role as a colonial and imperial force in the world. *Penny Dreadful* positions supernatural threats as reality, and these problems come from flawed characters and their experiences far from London, or from a set of haunted, personal histories. But unlike many female characters in Gothic narratives, they ultimately survive. The positioning of classic Gothic elements including family secrets and taboo sexuality in the story arcs of Sir Malcolm and Vanessa underscores the disruptive impact of colonialism on the individual characters and on the British Empire. To quote Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1994): "[T]he facts of empire are associated with sustained possession, with far-flung and sometimes unknown spaces, with eccentric or unacceptable human beings, with fortune-enhancing or fantasized activities like emigration, money-making, and sexual adventure" (64). Indeed, *Penny Dreadful* explores all the elements of the colonial imaginary that Said mentions through the character of Sir Malcolm. Sir Malcolm says Vanessa is the daughter he "deserves" because of her "cruel spirit" (S1E4). Sir Malcolm and Vanessa are both 'eccentric' and each seeks 'sexual adventure.'

Vanessa and Sir Malcolm have a difficult association that reflects the relationship between Britain and its colonies. After forcing Vanessa to continue fighting her demons (rather than letting her die) Dr Frankenstein suggests that Sir Malcolm has "not a shred of decency left" because that is what happens "when you murder your way across a continent" (S1E7). "Sir Malcolm," says the actor Timothy Dalton who portrays him, is "one of those men who has profited from the great advance across the globe of the British Empire [...] Vanessa describes him as being weak, vain, lustful, vainglorious, and a few other things" (qtd. in Gosling 88). Sir Malcolm vows to protect Vanessa

from the malevolence surrounding her, but never accepts that he, too, is evil. Paradoxically, Vanessa confides to Chandler that she worries about losing her relationship with Sir Malcom to his love interest, Mrs. Poole. Undoubtedly, Sir Malcolm is a father figure to most of the characters on *Penny Dreadful*, but his character is not one to emulate. He kills and rapes while in Africa. He sentences both his son Peter and daughter Mina to die, and he has an affair with Vanessa's mother. Sir Malcom operates in the series as the epitome of colonial Britain, while Vanessa resists this colonisation, and illogically craves it at the same time.

The ultimate immorality in the series, however, comes in the form of Dracula as he appears in the guise of a zoologist, Dr Alexander Sweet. He successfully hides his true identity from Vanessa and is able to manipulate her much like Sir Malcom does. As Dr Sweet, unlike the coloniser who broadcasts his goals, Dracula operates like an invading infection and embeds himself in English society and quietly builds his vampiric army from within. Stoker's Dracula forecasts this situation as he says to Jonathan Harker, "I have come to know your great England; and to know her is to love her. I long to go through the crowded streets of your mighty London, to be in the midst of the whirl and rush of humanity, to share its life, its change, its death, and all that makes it what it is" (26).

The vampire, in the context of both *Dracula* and *Penny Dreadful*, is the true enemy because he comes from afar to wreak his hidden havoc, rather than being an Englishman going abroad to do the same as a colonial power. Saverio Tomaiuolo explains: "Vampires seem to exemplify and embody a widespread fear of invasion and contagion during a moment in which England was experiencing both its triumph as Empire — with Queen Victoria crowned Empress of India in 1876 — and was facing and confronting with the problems related to the control over the various colonies" (109). Anne Williams writes in "Dracula: Si(g)ns of the Fathers" (1991) that "Victorian patriarchy may have needed its reassuring fictions [...] but they no doubt include changes in the political and social status of women, ambivalent reactions shown by faith in progress and the fear of change [...] The horror of *Dracula* is the horror of a culture sensing its own limitations, man's impotence before the universe" (459). To fulfil his destiny, in *Penny Dreadful*, Dracula needs Vanessa to be 'mother' to his role of 'father.'

While white Victorian women may be associated with home and family, Gothic fiction often illustrates that both can harbour many horrors. In *Penny Dreadful*, Dracula abducts Sir Malcom's daughter Mina as bait for Vanessa, and Mina's spectre appears in Sir Malcom's home for much of the first season. In "Angel in the House, Devil in the City: Explorations of Gender in *Dracula* and *Penny Dreadful*," (2006) Lauren Rocha explains, "For Mina to be transformed into a vampire would threaten England's nationalism as well as the masculinity of the male characters by making them subservient to a foreign vampire master" (32-33). Sir Malcom orders Vanessa to use her supernatural gifts to reach Mina, but in an unlikely turn, Mina seems to relish her new life and vampire form. She says, "I am who I am supposed to be" as she displays her fangs (S1E8). Mina becoming a vampire (and relishing it) brings the political nature of the series into clear view. Mina, sexually polluted by Dracula, appears as a colonised woman. Prior to her turn to vampirism, she functions as a damsel in distress (clothed in white) waiting for rescue. *Penny Dreadful* here offers an homage

to Stoker. Dracula says, "Your girls that you all love are mine already; and through them you and others shall yet be mine — my creatures, to do my bidding and to be my jackals when I want to feed" (Stoker 267). Mina acts as the vampire's proxy and tries to lure Vanessa to him so that he can "sire generations" (S1E8). Rocha adds, "Thus, *Penny Dreadful* depicts an unstable society where gender order is unable to be restored as men fail to save women who in turn threaten to derail and reconstruct society" (38). Unlike her counterpart in the novel, Mina in *Penny Dreadful* is unable to be saved and is punished by her father. Mina says to Sir Malcom, "Why do you think I want to be saved" as he shoots her to save Vanessa, illustrating the power of the coloniser over the colonised (S1E8). What Sir Malcom forgets is Vanessa is also colonised through her possession.

Bloodlines and family histories are key issues in the series and in colonial literary history. Early in Stoker's novel, Dracula tells Harker the story of his family history and why the bloodline is special: "We Szekelys have a right to be proud, for in our veins flows the blood of many brave races who fought as the lion fights, for lordship" (33). In *Penny Dreadful*, the threat of Vanessa and Dracula creating a new race of creatures is central. Silvia Nagy-Zekmi explains that "women in (post)colonial cultures have been termed 'the twice colonised', both by the imperial and the patriarchal social order" (177). Were she to procreate with Dracula, Vanessa would bear non-English offspring thus highlighting her colonised nature, and the union would create not only unholy beings, but also miscegenation as Donna Heiland explains, "Eighteenth-century colonizers were obsessed with defining the racial status of children whose parents were of different races," and *Penny Dreadful* invokes this history through the metaphor of the vampire and his spawn (153-154). Lyle and Frankenstein discuss the implications of Vanessa's plight and realise she could bring about the apocalypse through the elimination of mankind as they know it. Frankenstein says, "We have to help her," but he really means that they must save themselves *from her* (S3E7). Victorian cultural xenophobia comes into full view during *Penny Dreadful's* third season, but is present from the start as the male characters try to keep Dracula's personal invasion of Vanessa at bay. In the struggle between Dracula and Vanessa, the fate of the coloniser is in jeopardy, and like many Gothic narratives, the female character partially triumphs through her own destruction.

***Penny Dreadful* and Gothic Heroines/Damsels: Radcliffe and Lewis**

Gothic narratives can generally be divided into two camps, as I have mentioned above: The Female and Male Gothic. As I have discussed in "Does he know you like I know you?: Barbara Kean's bisexual appeal, the Male Gothic and *Gotham's* woman problem" (2021), these two strands could be considered according to distinction between Radcliffe (Female) and the Lewis (Male), since these two writers take different approaches to the Gothic in the genre's early life. The destruction of the female character, who is sometimes represented as a damsel in distress, is a fairly regular occurrence in a Male Gothic text. While in a Female Gothic narrative, the Gothic heroine, often depicted as a brave, curious young woman, survives to marry the man of her choice: the Gothic Hero. Male Gothic texts offer unexplained supernatural threats, versus the explained supernatural of the Female Gothic. Male Gothic texts provide gratuitous horror in comparison to the psychological terror of the Female Gothic; and finally, while both Male and Female Gothic texts present a main female

character trying to escape, Male Gothic texts show danger through graphic sexual encounters and brutal physicality and often death. *Penny Dreadful* – like Stoker's *Dracula*, on which it draws – fits squarely into the Male Gothic paradigm not only because of Vanessa's death, but also because the series presents the unexplained supernatural and gratuitous horror.

Even in a modern media product like *Penny Dreadful*, the conservative nature of the Male or Female Gothic still presides: death or marriage for the heroine/damsel. Vanessa is brave, like a Female Gothic Heroine, and experiences myriad physical dangers, like a Male Gothic damsel in distress; however, she refuses both Chandler and Dracula as love interests and marriage as a concept. "Vanessa," Benjamin Poore writes, "decidedly does not fit into the penny-fiction category of the helpless or hysterical virgin in need of rescue" (n.p.). The heroine/damsel often seeks escape from her situation, but Vanessa eschews the idea of a total escape. She says "There cannot be a happy end. For claw will slash and tooth will rend" (S1E8). But Vanessa is also not a "blameless heroine triumphing," as Diane Long Hoeveler describes the Female Gothic Heroine to be (9). Vanessa's strong individuality sustains her through the nightmare world of *Penny Dreadful*, but since she refuses marriage, there is no other ending – as a female character in a Gothic text – except for her own destruction.

Additionally, Vanessa stands apart from both the damsel or the Gothic heroine role because heroines/damsels typically look for their missing other halves including denied lovers and parents. Vanessa, as an orphan, has no family, but she creates her own version through the company of friends she meets throughout the series, but they are not sufficient to alleviate the danger she encounters. Without a legitimate family system in place, Vanessa lacks the originating impetus to escape a Female Gothic narrative. Additionally, as Williams explains, in *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic* (1995):

[T]he family structure [...] incarnates the laws fundamental to our culture and our selves: laws that also govern our thinking about property, morality, social behavior, and even metaphysics. These family 'scandals' of Gothic criticism also rather melodramatically call attention to the importance of boundaries: the literal and figurative processes by which society organizes itself [...] Such lines and walls both create the possibility of transgression and suggest a proper punishment for those rebels who cross them (12).

Vanessa crosses many boundaries throughout *Penny Dreadful* as she transgresses against sexual mores, so she cannot survive as a Female Gothic Heroine or a damsel in distress because she is not Hoeveler's "blameless heroine" (9). Vanessa has sex with Mina's fiancé the night before their wedding. This is the choice that sets the action of the series effectively in motion, rather than her family trying to push her into a marriage (S1E5). Williams explains further: "[T]he Male Gothic has a tragic plot. The female formula demands a happy ending, the conventional marriage of

Western comedy" (*Art of Darkness* 103). The Female Gothic requires a return to normalcy be present at the end. The Male Gothic ending, while more ambiguous than the Female Gothic's, ultimately requires the submission of women to unknown and dangerous fates (Williams, *Art of Darkness* 104). Vanessa must be eliminated or married by conventional Gothic rules. However, in *Penny Dreadful*, Vanessa chooses her own ending, refuses marriage, and defines her own death. These choices mean she cannot be a Female Gothic Heroine or a Male Gothic damsel.

The Post-Colonial Gothic and Female Characters

Vanessa uses her possession as personal power, and thereby embraces a foreign invader rather than an English patriarchal system. During "Possession," a tattoo appears on Vanessa's chest depicting the Egyptian gods Amunet and Amun-Ra (S1E7). Sinan Akilli and Seda Öz write that the positioning of the Egyptian deity reflects "the Victorians' fascination with Egyptology [...] Such intrusion of a foreign and pagan past into the late-Victorian metropolis [...] is also powerfully symbolic and functional with regard to the characterization of London/Demimonde in its duality" (20-21). Vanessa's divided nature, what Dr Seward calls her "split personality" illustrates the cultural fracture in British society (S3E7). Fred Botting, in *Gothic* (2003), writes "from the eighteenth century onwards, Gothic texts have been involved in constructing and contesting distinctions between civilisation and barbarism, reason and desire, self and other" (20). Vanessa is a divided person: one inhabited by another force, she calls this a "thing" that is "always scratching to get out" (S1E7). Vanessa tries to suppress her possessed nature, but eventually in "And They Were Enemies," she stops three other women, called "Nightcomers," through embracing the power she herself holds (S2E10).

Vanessa begins her journey wanting to escape from internalised pain caused by her possession, and ends the series when she accepts all parts of herself. "I am" she tells both Lucifer and Dracula as she refuses their kinship (S3E4). Vanessa understands her weaknesses and takes responsibility for her actions. "I am like no other," she tells Joan Clayton "that is why I am here" (S2E3). She is the opposite of the complicit coloniser (Sir Malcom) or the typical damsel-in-distress (Sir Malcom's daughter Mina). In *Penny Dreadful*, Vanessa saves herself, her country, and the larger world by refusing to remain with Dracula. This sacrifice, while heroic, is demanded by the Gothic conventions on which the series is built, as I have shown.

As Vanessa does not fit the requirements of a Female Gothic Heroine or a damsel in distress, the other characters in the series see her as the strong character she is: "Don't be naïve; it doesn't suit you," Sir Malcom tells Vanessa (S1E8). Similarly, Sembene respects Vanessa's strength. "She is a lioness" he tells Chandler (S2E4). Vanessa finds love interests in Dorian Gray, Chandler, and Dr Sweet, (Dracula's alter ego), but no Gothic Hero (or Villain) sways her. No man frees her from any patriarchal system; she ultimately frees herself. With her decision to die, she defies the Female Gothic Heroine or damsel role. In this way, series creator Logan sets up the audience for his new kind of female character in a Gothic text. He says:

I decided to write about a female protagonist, because in 1891 London, women were quite literally corseted and constrained [...] I thought creating a woman who had to live in that society and yet within her had these monstrous yearnings, or these yearnings for liberation, would make a very compelling central character. [...] Meaning, on one hand, she is tormented, she is cursed [...] She most perfectly embodies both sides of that monstrous balancing act (qtd. in Gosling 122).

In the end, however, Vanessa is far more than a woman with “monstrous yearnings.” She controls both the destruction and re-creation of humanity. In this way, Vanessa can be compared to another female character in a modern televisual Gothic text: Buffy in *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003). Claire Knowles writes, “Buffy can be saved only through the destruction of her body. Death, is, indeed, Buffy’s gift” (147). Vanessa, like Buffy, must die because the Gothic ultimately demands the sacrifice of women, either through conventional family life or through death.

Penny Dreadful offers some insight into the Victorian cultural fear about feminism. This fear is illustrated in Stoker’s *Dracula* through the strong, but non-threatening New Woman Mina Harker and her brush with vampirism. In *Penny Dreadful*, this discussion is elucidated through the extended metaphor of Vanessa’s demonic possession as a form of colonisation and the threat of her union with Dracula. Her possession casts doubt on the society in which she lives. Even without Egyptian tattoos or copulation with Dracula, Vanessa is a marked outsider, an *Other*, as an independent woman in a patriarchal society. With the addition of a Goddess, Vanessa, like Stoker’s Margaret Trelawny/Queen Tera paring in *The Jewel of Seven Stars*, becomes overwhelming, powerful, and unnatural as she transforms into a monster. Not as popular as *Dracula*, *The Jewel of Seven Stars* features many of the narrative elements found in *Penny Dreadful*, including a distant father, a motherless daughter, her suitor, and an Egyptian mummy. One version (1903) offers an apocalyptic ending with Queen Tera raining down destruction, and the other (1912) has Margaret wearing the queen’s jewels at her wedding. In both versions, Margaret is dangerous because of Queen Tera: “Again, the startling likeness between Margaret and the mummy, intensified by her own extraordinary pallor, heightened the strangeness of it all” (Stoker, *Jewel* 1125).

Penny Dreadful, like *The Jewel of Seven Stars* and many seminal Gothic texts, highlights the evil present – for dominant Victorian culture – in the everyday and in the every(wo)man. In “Ebb Tide,” Kaetenay tells Vanessa in a vision that she “is a great, fertile bitch of evil and I love you for your fertility and your power. You are the woman of all our dreams and all our night terrors” (S3E7). Vanessa is called “mother” by Dracula’s minions. She, through her power, could change the course of human history. No Radcliffian Gothic Heroine could save the world in this way. No Lewis-like damsel would survive *Penny Dreadful*. Here again, series creator Logan attempts to revise the role of a Gothic heroine/damsel. Unfortunately, the Gothic constraints of either death or marriage keep Vanessa from ultimately escaping the narrative.

Vanessa's story arc is foretold in the season-one episode "Possession" when she asks Chandler to kill her: "They won't stop me. They haven't the heart for it. But you do. Look into my eyes and pull the trigger" (S1E7). Vanessa's bravery and understanding of her situation is both tragic and heroic and recalls Mina Harker's decision to choose death over vampirism in *Dracula*. Mina says, "There is a poison in my blood," but unlike Vanessa, Stoker's Mina survives (286). Vanessa can never be freed from her colonised body, and in the final moments of the series, Vanessa again says to Chandler, "My battle must end. You know that [...] Let it end [...] You know I have a destiny. It's why we first met. It's why you are here now [...] Please Ethan. Let it end. With a kiss [...] With love" (S3E9). She demands his assistance to die, and they share the action since she is also holding the gun, and unlike Sir Malcom's shooting of Mina, this ending is Vanessa's choice. It is not something done to her. Vanessa chooses to die as herself rather than be subjugated to Dracula for eternity. Vanessa's ending is heroic in the modern sense through her self-sacrifice, but she is not a traditional Gothic heroine, nor is she a damsel.

The modern, postcolonial framework for *Penny Dreadful* sets up the potential for a new version of a Gothic heroine, but the constraints of the Gothic as a genre preclude that from happening in a meaningful way. Vanessa lacks the innocence to be a Female Gothic Heroine, or the naiveté to be rescued in the Male Gothic tradition; however, Vanessa is the strongest character in *Penny Dreadful* and blazes a new trail with her new form of Gothic female character. Unfortunately, the conservative Gothic conventions insist that she must die even in this modern, postcolonial narrative. Vanessa, unlike Chandler and Sir Malcom, never needs rescue. She always knows how her story will end. Dorian Gray remarks that Vanessa "doesn't want to be anyone else," and for Vanessa, being herself is a transgressive act in itself (S1E4). Vanessa's singular nature eschews a traditional Gothic world, so Vanessa's forceful self-acceptance helps her find her own way. Vanessa never falters. She is resilient from the first episode "Night Work" until the series' end in "The Blessed Dark." Maybe one day, contemporary writers will not only continue to create these rich, necessary characters like Vanessa lives in these important and political texts, but will also find a way for them to survive the narratives.

NOTES

1. "Evil Spirits in Heavenly Places." *Penny Dreadful*, season 2, episode 4.
2. "Glorious Horrors." *Penny Dreadful*, season 2, episode 6.

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